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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REUNITING THE CHURCHES

THE Editor of this REVIEW requests an opinion from me of Dr. Fosdick's article, in the May number, on "Reuniting the Church." It is a forcible expression of thoughts now in the mind of many churchmen, whatever their denomination. Dr. Fosdick mentions the Christian Unity Foundation, and I speak as a member of that body, and shall refer to several conferences that have been held by it; but what I say is not to be taken as binding the Foundation or any of its members except myself.

I could wish that Dr. Fosdick had used the plural in his title—making it, Reuniting the Churches—for does not this better describe the situation? The oftener I have had the privilege of conferring with members of various religious bodies in connection with our Foundation, the more evident it has been that (to quote one of our articles of incorporation) all these denominations possess "actual membership in the one body of Christ": that essential unity has not been absolutely broken by our unhappy divisions. In which connection one can hardly quote too often the fervid words of Bishop Andrewes, of the Church of England: "Though our government be of divine right, it follows not that without it there is no salvation, or that a church cannot exist. He must be blind who does not see churches existing without it. He must be made of iron who denies them salvation. We are not those iron people. We make a wide difference between those things."* The phraseology savors of the Reformation period, but the gist of it is not out of date. There is one body, and one Holy Spirit. External union is an outward manifestation of this spiritual unity. External union has been more or less broken; and to restore it is the desire of those who pray for "reuniting the churches"; though uniformity is not to be confounded with union, and alliance is not necessarily unity.

We Americans find in our political experience a helpful, though inadequate, analogy which illustrates the difference between unity and union. Our United States, although they have union, nearly lost it. If the Southern Confederacy had been effected, outward union would have been broken between North and South; but their spiritual, racial unity would not necessarily have been quite destroyed, and union might have been restored. Nevertheless we regarded the manifest union of all the States as so precious, that for the sake of it we were willing to sacrifice much blood and treasure. In the process of the years the evils of disunion among

* Cited by Dr. H. E. Thompson, *The Historic Episcopate*, p. 239.

the churches have been realized more and more. Each of them has suffered and learned much. No portion of the divided Church has been without fruits of the Spirit. Under the auspices of the Christian Unity Foundation, in friendly and illuminating conferences, individuals of several of the separated denominations have—unofficially and informally—assembled to pray and to discuss such questions as these: What has each denomination learned by its own experience? If union should be restored, even if there must be some subtraction of present peculiarities, what must each denomination hold to, and bring with it? Are our principles to-day quite the same as our forefathers' were? and do we not now lay less stress than formerly, or a different stress, on matters which still keep us from full communion? What steps have you already taken to improve your order? Since episcopacy—Greek, Roman, Anglican, Methodist—is already the preponderant method, is not episcopacy one key to the situation as to reunion in the Church of the Reconciliation? and how far might episcopal government be practically recognized as the center of governmental unity, by virtue of the power committed to the people of God, without insisting that episcopacy be recognized as the sole channel of divine grace, and without an obligatory philosophy, or theory, of Holy Orders? Without presuming to bind, or even pretending to represent adequately the denominations to which we severally belong, what would we as individuals be willing to drop, if by so doing reunion could be secured? and what creed can we all join in? Which of our denominations are nearest now? and cannot they get together to begin with?

After our conference with Presbyterians, the late Judge William M. Lanning, a prominent Presbyterian, said to me: "I confess that before this conference I had little hope of reunion between Episcopalians and Presbyterians; but I am going away with the happy hope that, sooner or later, reunion is not impossible. And I thank God for it." Not a few, of various denominations, have felt likewise; though the very reality and spontaneity of our conferences made us profoundly aware of the difficulties. Certainly, when we parted, we all felt that our intellectual and spiritual modesty had deepened. Our Foundation's leaflets, published with an account of our conferences with Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Disciples of Christ, and others, will be of interest to readers of this REVIEW, especially in connection with the Australian Resolutions.

There is so much to say, in so limited a space, that I hardly know what to omit. It was a remark of Luther, in his later years: "I tell my God that if He will have His Church, He must govern her Himself. We cannot do it; and if we thought we could, we should be the proudest asses under heaven." Dr. Fosdick speaks wisely and well of the popular impatience of the waste of spiritual energy, and the glaring inefficiency of the churches. Yet in our efforts to cure inefficiency we must remember that human standards of efficiency may not be God's standard. A young man, burdened with doubts as to God's providential care of the world, once said to me, in the characteristic slang of the day, "God doesn't seem to get there." I answered, "Are you sure you know where God intends to get?" It is in this view that I agree with Dr. Fosdick that the church union of the future may be on other lines than we conceive of. So far as we Americans can see, however, and so long as democracy prevails, the united church, while governed constitutionally,

will not be organized for one-man power; nor will the Italian, nor even the European cast of mind, be absolutely dominant. Yet we Americans need not expect that the united church will, on the other hand, be a sort of mere Holding Company. And the awful duty of private judgment will be safeguarded, so that the ministers of God's Word may commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. There will be no extreme centralization; though it will not be supposed that every man is his own theologian, any more than every man is his own scientist or economist.

Dr. Fosdick thinks there will be "no credal subscription"; but in our Unity conferences I do not remember that any one, of any denomination, expressed himself as unable to accept the Apostles' Creed. In another place Dr. Fosdick speaks of "a transforming faith in the spiritual meaning of life." Is not that a creed? Even agnosticism and materialism are creeds. In proportion to our intellectuality, demonstrated premises are conducive to our faith; but our creed is also a matter of our will—of our will to live. Human inferences from revealed facts are not infallible; so that to subject doctrinal inferences to a perpetual stream of criticism may be but "to love God with one's mind"; but real criticism involves real faith, and a creed to start with. Therefore in avoiding over-definition, and the disposition to build up charges of inferential and constructive heresy, the united church will not be without credal subscription; for some such subscription is essential to co-operative organization among reasonable human beings. It is the basis of personal devotion; and Christianity is personal devotion to Jesus Christ in fellowship with men.

Dr. Fosdick's article, therefore, taken as a whole, seems to me somewhat inconclusive and disappointing; too utilitarian, too careless of organic union. To some persons my article also may be disappointing. But this may not be a fault on the part of either of us.

"They see not clearliest who see all things clear."

The Christian church is still young. Probably we are yet in the primitive era of Christianity; for nineteen centuries are but a fraction of the years that lie before mankind. In spite of all that is to the contrary, Dr. Fosdick considers, with Dr. Carroll, that the sixteen Baptist bodies should be united; the eighteen Methodist reduced to three or four; the twelve Presbyterians to three; the twelve Mennonites to two. But Ambassador Bryce, in his inaugural address to the Conference of Historians, speaking of the wonderful unification of the whole earth under the swift changes of the last twenty years, concludes that as commerce and finance and politics have followed in the wake of science in all this process, so will religion: that as eight great political powers sway the world to-day, and already practically there are only four great religions, so a century hence possibly only three great faiths will remain. Is it, then, impossible that Christians everywhere may by and by compass reunion? or that the vision of that great seer, Dr. W. R. Huntington, may be fulfilled—"American Catholicity, with a simple creed, a varied worship, a generous polity"? Let his watchword be ours: "Hope on, Hope ever."

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